

# You and Your HEALTH

*A Woman's Handbook*



BRITISH  
COLUMBIA

Women's Health Bureau  
BC Ministry of Health and  
Ministry Responsible for Seniors

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**Message from****The Honourable Penny Priddy****Minister of Health and Minister Responsible for Seniors**

**A**s women, we know that we have special health care needs which are different from those of men. Because of differences in social and economic status, educational focus, pay rates, and the impact of violence in women's lives, our health exists in a different social context from men's health. There are many health issues that are particular to women and that require a special, women-centred approach.

We are living in a time when women want to know more about their bodies and how to take responsibility for their own health as well as the health of their families. More than ever before, women are becoming informed health care consumers. Health care professionals are learning to respect women's need for information and their desire to be partners in their own health management.

This is the way of the future for health care and particularly for women's health care. Historically, women have been in the vanguard of the self-care movement, and we continue to point the way for others to follow. This is the spirit in which we offer ***You and Your Health: A Woman's Handbook***. Used wisely, it can help you to become more confident about your ability to make informed lifestyle and health care choices.

# Project Sponsors and Partners

**T**his booklet is a project of the BC Ministry of Health, Women's Health Bureau. It is being distributed to women in BC through the courtesy of the Screening Mammography Program of BC and provincial health authorities.

The Women's Health Bureau provides a link between the Ministry of Health, health care providers, and community groups in order to promote a health care system that is sensitive to the needs of women. The Women's Health Bureau works to ensure that provincial-level health policies are gender sensitive and helps health authorities develop women-centred policies and services. The bureau also supports a limited number of projects such as research on women's health issues.

For more information about the Women's Health Bureau, phone (250) 952-2237 or visit the bureau's web site: [www.health.gov.bc.ca/whb](http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/whb).

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# INTRODUCTION

## Why this booklet?

Individual brochures and booklets on breast cancer, osteoporosis, and other women's health issues are available in a variety of places such as doctors' offices and health units. However, until now women in BC have not had easy access to a comprehensive general guide to staying healthy. This handbook will help fill that need. *You and Your Health* focuses on preventing, identifying and managing common women's health concerns and will be widely available in places where women seek preventive health services.

## Why focus on women's health?

Paying special attention to women's health is important because gender is a determinant of health. Women not only have a different physical makeup from men, they have different life experiences such as their roles as mothers and family caregivers. They are more likely to have low incomes and low social status and are more often adversely affected by other determinants of health such as the need for social support. Because of a woman's role as family caregiver, her health is important not only for her own sake but also for the sake of her family.

Most women in BC enjoy good health. However, women have more contact with the health system because they live longer than men, have more care-giving and child-rearing responsibilities, and have more chronic illnesses. Women are also subject to specific health problems such as breast cancer and cancers related to the reproductive system. Some problems, such as heart disease, stress, and sexually transmitted diseases, are associated with environmental and lifestyle factors. Women can do a great deal to protect their health by learning about positive lifestyle choices and about how to develop healthy living and working environments. Other risks, such as sexual assault and relationship violence, are associated with women's social roles and personal relationships. For women, recognizing the

dynamics of an unhealthy intimate relationship may be a matter of life and death.

Some aspects of women's health (menopause and reproduction, for example) may be over-medicalized, and women often want to know about non-medical approaches to these issues. On the other hand, some women's health concerns are minimized and discounted as emotional. Women need to know more about the possible reasons for their concerns and about gender-sensitive treatment. Sometimes, such as in women's cancers, early detection is the key to leading longer, healthier lives. In these cases, women need information about which tests are necessary and reliable.

This handbook helps to fill a need for reliable information about women's health. The information included here is based on scientific studies and well-established concepts, and qualified health professionals have checked it for accuracy.

### **How to use this book**

This book is a tool to help you stay healthy. It shows you what you can do to develop the basic elements of a healthy lifestyle. It will help you to understand potential health risks and how you can offset those risks by being alert to your body and making positive choices. It will also help you to follow up on any potential problems with appropriate methods of early detection.

To make best use of this handbook, read it through and become familiar with the general concepts. Then go back to any sections you feel are important for you and study them more intensively. If you have a family history of heart disease or cancer, for example, you will probably want to become familiar with recommended preventive strategies. Everyone can benefit from a careful study of the opening section on guidelines for a healthy lifestyle.

## **PART 1: STAYING HEALTHY**

### **TEN TIPS FOR STAYING HEALTHY**

#### **1. Immunize.**

Immunization is the best way to prevent serious diseases such as diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus, polio, measles, mumps, rubella, hepatitis B virus, and Hib, a type of bacteria that causes meningitis. Protect your family by keeping your immunizations and those of your children up to date.

#### **2. Keep moving.**

A minimum of 30 accumulated minutes of moderate exercise almost every day can improve your health significantly. Regular physical activity helps to maintain a healthy body weight and also helps control cholesterol and blood pressure. Moderate exercise will also help you enjoy life more. The best exercises to strengthen the heart and lungs are the aerobic ones like brisk walking, jogging, dancing, and swimming. Weight-bearing exercises such as walking, jogging, dancing, and tennis also build stronger bones.

**KEEP  
FIT**

**Frequency:** almost every day

**Intensity:** moderately hard within your heart rate range

**Time:** 30 to 60 accumulated minutes

**Type:** aerobic exercise (e.g., brisk walking, cycling, swimming, raking leaves, dancing, water aerobics)

BEGINNING  
AN  
EXERCISE  
ROUTINE

- Check with your doctor before starting a new, strenuous activity.
- Select activities you can:
  - achieve
  - maintain
  - enjoy.
- Vary your exercises.
- Work at your own level.
- Exercise with a friend.
- Adapt your exercise to your own physical capacities.
- Have fun.

**3. Eat right.**

A well-balanced diet of nutritious high-fibre, low-fat foods will give you energy and help prevent many health problems such as high blood pressure and high blood cholesterol.



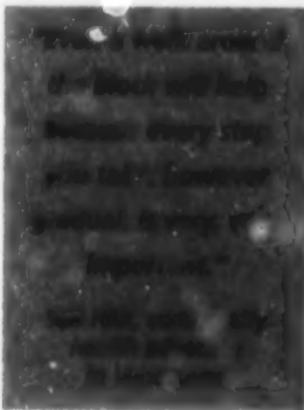
GUIDELINES  
FOR  
HEALTHY  
EATING

1. Eat a variety of foods every day.
2. Emphasize fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.
3. Choose lower-fat dairy products, leaner meats or meat alternatives, and foods prepared with little or no fat.
4. Limit salt, sugar, alcohol, caffeine, and processed foods.
5. Drink plenty of water.

For more information, see  
*Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating.*

#### 4. Control stress.

Learning to relax can help you avoid the wear and tear on your immune system that comes with unrelieved stress. Simple relaxation exercises can slow heart rate and breathing, lower blood pressure, and help relieve muscle tension.



#### 5. Be smoke-free.

The best approach is never to start smoking. If you do smoke, quitting brings tremendous health benefits. It is one of the most important things you can do for yourself and the health of those around you.

#### 6. Avoid illicit drugs and excess alcohol.

Many medical problems are associated with the overuse or abuse of alcohol or illicit drugs.

## **7. Put safety first.**

To stay healthy, practice safety at home, at work, and at play. For example, two important practices that will help you stay healthy are safe driving and safe sex.

## **8. Allow time for healthy pleasures.**

Enjoy the company of friends and family, take naps, play with your kids, laugh, care for a pet, get involved in your community, pursue your passion. Enjoyment can add to your health.

## **9. Think positively about yourself and your options.**

Your immune system responds to your thoughts, emotions, and actions. People with positive attitudes are often healthier. On the other hand, pessimism often aggravates ill health. See change as a challenge, an opportunity instead of a threat. Strong spiritual beliefs can also support your pursuit of healing and health.



## **10. Seek peaceful solutions to the conflicts in your life.**

Look for constructive, non-violent ways to resolve conflicts at home, at school, at work, and in your community. Contact a health professional or your local women's centre for help if you are concerned about violent behaviour in yourself, a family member, or friend.

# FEELING GOOD ABOUT YOURSELF

## **Healthy feelings**

Healthy feelings come from thinking positively about yourself and others. Evidence now supports the idea that what you think causes chemical changes in the brain that can influence your health and well-being.

Optimism and positive thoughts are resources for healing. Your body can create natural pain killers called endorphins, gamma-globulin for fortifying your immune system, and interferon for combatting infections, viruses, and even cancer. Your body can combine these and other substances into a vast number of natural prescriptions for what ails you.

With practice, you can learn to alter your feelings and improve your health by directing your thoughts into more positive channels.

## **Unhealthy feelings**

It is normal to feel worried, anxious, and nervous from time to time, but these feelings are not normal when they become overwhelming and interfere with daily life.

### **Unhealthy feelings include:**

- phobias (irrational, involuntary fears of common places, objects, or situations)
- panic attacks (feelings of intense fear and anxiety accompanied by hyperventilation, shaking, pounding of the heart, and feeling faint)
- depression
- thoughts of suicide
- anger that leads to violent behaviour

Home treatment (relaxation, getting enough rest, keeping active and engaged, and so on) may help relieve simple anxiety and mild depression, but if unhealthy feelings persist, get help from a health care professional.

## **Health and relationships**

Healthy relationships must include mutual respect, honesty, and trust. Unhealthy or abusive relationships may be hazardous to your emotional and physical health. Here are some clues to help you evaluate your relationship.

### **A healthy relationship:**

- feeling able to talk about your feelings
- respecting each other's friends and activities
- considering each other's feelings and opinions
- feeling able to express differences of opinion
- having an equal say in negotiating solutions

### **An unhealthy relationship:**

- believing you have more rights, or less rights, than the other person
- yelling when you are angry
- using the silent treatment
- getting what you want by pouting
- getting what you want by nagging

**An abusive relationship:**

one person dominating and controlling the other

not being allowed to see friends

name-calling/put-downs

intimidating, hitting, or destroying property

constant criticism

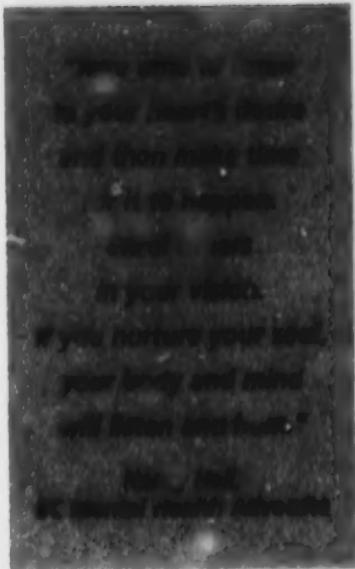
extreme jealousy or possessiveness

If you are in an unhealthy or abusive relationship, it is important to seek help. You can usually get help through organizations such as your local women's centre or shelter.

# MANAGING STRESS

## What is stress?

Some stress is normal, especially when it is associated with crises and life-changing events such as illness, death of a loved one, marriage or divorce, changing jobs or losing a job, or children leaving home. Some stress comes from the pressures we put on ourselves. As women, some of us tend to worry too much, overload our schedules, take on responsibility for other people, and try too hard to please others. This kind of stress can build up to the point where we feel overwhelmed and defeated.



## How can you deal with stress?

Your attitude toward stress has a greater effect on your health than the stress itself. Taking a positive approach can help you regain a sense that you are in charge of your life.

1. Limit alcohol and other stimulants, such as caffeine.
2. Exercise regularly.
3. Practice relaxing for at least 20 minutes a day.
4. Get enough sleep.
5. Take stress breaks.
6. Do something for yourself every day.

7. Have realistic expectations of situations, of others, and of yourself.
8. Stop negative thoughts and look for the positive in situations and people.
9. Share your feelings with friends and family.
10. Keep your sense of humour.

If you feel your stress levels are too high and you have difficulty coping, you may want to look for someone who can help.

## USING HEALTH CARE WISELY

- **Pay attention to your body.**

- Be aware of what is normal for you.
- Keep a record of your personal medical history, including immunizations, screening tests (PAP smear, breast examination), menstrual cycle, surgeries, major illnesses, allergies, and current medications.
- Keep a record of major illnesses in your family.

- **Choose health care professionals carefully.**

Choose a doctor or other health care practitioner before you need one. Ask friends, family, or other practitioners for recommendations. You may wish to interview practitioners to find one with whom you can work comfortably. Don't be afraid to ask questions about such matters as availability on weekends and holidays, house calls, what hospital a doctor works with, getting access to your personal records if necessary, and whether

you can bring a partner, family member, or support person with you to your visits.

- **Be a partner with health care professionals.**

Prepare for office visits by making a list of questions and symptoms — when they started and if or how they have changed. Voice your concerns and ask questions about anything you don't understand, including tests and treatment options. Make notes for future reference. If necessary, ask for copies of your personal health records. Inform yourself about your health and practice self-care.

- **Take part in deciding which treatment is best for you.**

When you have a diagnosis, research your treatment options. You may find you have a number of choices that could be effective.

- **Investigate complementary or alternative therapies.**

Complementary therapies use a variety of non-medical approaches such as nutritional counselling, herbs and vitamins, massage, and other non-drug treatments. For women in midlife, especially, these methods may produce beneficial results and a feeling of being in charge of their own health. As with other therapies, it is important to make sure the treatment works for you and that it is safe.



## **PART 2: UNDERSTANDING YOUR HEALTH**

### **ADDICTIONS**

You have an addiction when you have a physical or psychological "need" for drugs such as alcohol, prescription medications, or "street" drugs (for example, cocaine or marijuana). You may not know you have a problem until you try to stop using the drug.

- Avoid problems with alcohol by having no more than one or two drinks a day of beer, wine, or hard liquor, depending on your size and risk factors. If you are pregnant, abstain from alcohol completely.
- Don't use alcohol or drugs to deal with depression, anxiety, or loneliness. Try non-drug alternatives.
- Be cautious when using painkillers, tranquilizers, sedatives, and sleeping pills. Don't take more than your doctor recommends and don't take them any longer than is really necessary.
- If you think you may have a problem, get in touch with your health professional or a self-help group such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous.
- Give yourself the following self-test to see if your drinking or drug use is serious enough to need outside help. If you answer "yes" to any of these questions, you may have a problem that needs attention.

## **SELF TEST**

**Have you ever had trouble or failed when you promised yourself to stop using alcohol or drugs for a week or more?**

**Do you get upset when other people suggest you should stop or cut down on your use of alcohol or drugs?**

**When faced with a problem, do you often turn to alcohol or drugs for relief?**

**Do you ever feel guilty about your drinking or drug use and try to hide it?**

**Have you had problems with family, friends, or co-workers because of your drinking or drug use?**

**Have you missed any work days because of using alcohol or drugs?**

**Do you ever go on binges with alcohol or drugs?**

# BONE HEALTH

Women usually reach their maximum bone mass in their 30s. After that, bones naturally start losing calcium and getting thinner. For most women this is not a problem. But some women lose calcium faster than others (for example: Caucasians, Orientals, smokers, those with a family history of osteoporosis). Osteoporosis is a name for the condition in which bones get so thin that they break easily.

## Keep bones strong.

The best time to build strong bones is in your teen years, but most older women can slow the advance of osteoporosis through diet, exercise, and other healthy choices.

- Don't smoke.
- Limit alcoholic drinks to no more than one or two a day.
- Put some physical activity in every day, especially weight-bearing activities such as walking, golfing, cross-country skiing, shuffleboard, curling, bowling, baseball, aerobics, dancing, racquet sports.
- Women 25 to 50 years need 1000 mg of calcium every day, plus 100 I.U. of Vitamin D. Women over 50 need 1,000 to 1,500 mg of calcium every day, plus 200 I.U. of Vitamin D. Foods rich in calcium include milk, cheese, and yogurt; canned sardines or salmon with bones; almonds; lentils or beans; tofu; broccoli and other vegetables from the cabbage family. If necessary, take calcium supplements. (For more information about non-dairy sources of calcium, phone Dial-A-Dietician at 1-800-667-3438.)
- Get some vitamin D every day to help your body absorb the calcium in your food. Sources of Vitamin D are sunshine and fortified milk.

- To prevent falls and fractures, keep fit and avoid using sedatives and narcotics unless absolutely necessary. Remove household hazards such as loose rugs.



# CANCER

## Know the facts.

- The most common cancer in women is breast cancer, followed by cancer of the lung, intestines and rectum, and uterus, in that order. However, lung cancer is the number one cause of cancer death in women in BC. These cancers (with the exception of lung cancer) are likely to respond well to treatment if they are discovered early.
- Women discover 90 percent of breast lumps themselves.
- The majority of breast lumps are not cancerous.
- The risk of breast cancer increases with age.
- It is normal for one breast to be slightly different from the other.
- The combination of monthly self-exams, professional breast exams, and mammography can detect breast cancer early, when a cure is most likely.
- Women who have more than one first degree relative (mother, sister, daughter) with breast cancer before menopause have a higher risk.
- Beginning menstruation early and having menopause late are associated with a slightly increased risk of breast cancer.



## **Know the signs.**

- Report any breast lumps or any changes in appearance to your doctor.
- Report any of the following symptoms to your doctor: bleeding from the rectum, a change in bowel habits (persistent constipation or diarrhea), or vague, dull, or annoying abdominal pains.
- A chronic cough that may cause blood in the sputum is often the first sign of lung cancer. Other signs can include increasing amounts of mucus and shortness of breath.
- A PAP test can detect changes in the cells of the cervix before they become cancerous.
- Unusual bleeding before, during, or after menopause may indicate uterine or endometrial cancer.
- Squamous cell skin cancer can show up as a pale, wax-like, pearly nodule that may get larger and form a crust or as a red, scaly patch with sharp outline.
- Melanoma often begins as a mole-like growth which may become itchy or bleed. It may change shape, grow larger, or change colour. See your doctor immediately.

## Protect yourself.

- You may be able to lower your risk of cancer by living a healthy lifestyle, including exercising and eating a low-fat, high-fibre diet that includes plenty of fruits and fresh vegetables.
- Examine your own breasts every month; have periodic professional breast exams; and if you are between 50 and 79, have a mammogram every two years.
- Use a condom or diaphragm to reduce the risk of cervical cancer.
- Have regular PAP smears to test for cervical cancer. (See page 36 for more information on PAP smears and when to get them.)
- Don't smoke.
- Limit salt, alcohol, and caffeine.
- Maintain a healthy weight (see BMI chart on page 35) and do some physical activity most days.
- Be aware of changes in your normal state of health. If you have a lump or sore that does not heal or if something feels wrong, don't shrug it off. Have your doctor check it out.



# HEART HEALTH

Did you know that heart attacks and strokes are the leading cause of death for women in Canada? Although 81 percent of women surveyed believe breast cancer is their biggest threat, in reality, more women die from heart disease than from breast cancer, uterine cancer, and lung cancer combined.

Fortunately, there are a lot of things you can do to prevent heart disease. Here are some ways to be "heart smart."

## **Avoid the risk factors.**

### **• Smoking**

Cigarette smoking puts added strain on the heart because it constricts blood vessels. Women who smoke are two to six times more likely to have a heart attack than women who don't smoke. Lifestyle prescription: don't smoke.

### **• High blood pressure**

High blood pressure increases the risk of heart attacks and stroke. Women are more likely to develop high blood pressure after their middle years. Lifestyle prescription: maintain a healthy blood pressure.

### **• High blood cholesterol**

Between the ages of 45 and 55, women's cholesterol levels begin to rise higher than men's. About one in three Canadian women have cholesterol levels high enough to pose a risk for heart disease. Lifestyle prescription: maintain normal cholesterol levels.



- **Lack of physical exercise**

Inactive people are twice as likely to develop heart disease as active people. Regular physical activity also helps to maintain a healthy body weight and control cholesterol and blood pressure. The best exercises to strengthen the heart and lungs are the aerobic ones like brisk walking, jogging, dancing, and swimming. Lifestyle prescription: do some moderate physical activity for at least 30 minutes most days.

- **Diabetes, or high blood sugar**

Women with diabetes have double the risk of dying from heart disease. Women over 45 are twice as likely to develop diabetes as men. Lifestyle prescription: use exercise and healthy eating to help manage blood sugar problems.

- **Obesity**

There is a clear link between heart disease and obesity (too much body fat). Maintaining a healthy weight helps prevent heart disease by reducing the risk of high blood pressure and high blood cholesterol levels. (Use the Body Mass Index or BMI chart on page 35 to find out your healthy weight.) Lifestyle prescription: maintain a healthy weight by increasing your physical activity and eating a balanced, low-fat diet. (See 6 Steps to Heart Healthy Eating for a definition of a healthy diet.)

- **High stress levels**

Stress may be a factor in heart disease. Lifestyle prescription: control stress through deep breathing, yoga, and other methods of relaxation.

## Six Steps to Heart Healthy Eating

1. Eat less added fats.
2. Eat more whole grain products.
3. Eat more vegetables and fruit.
4. Choose lower-fat milk products.
5. Select smaller, leaner portions of meat and meat alternatives.
6. Limit high-fat snacks and desserts.

### ***Learn the warning signs.***

Women often experience different heart attack symptoms than men do. These differences can result in a wrong diagnosis and may delay your chances of getting the right treatment.

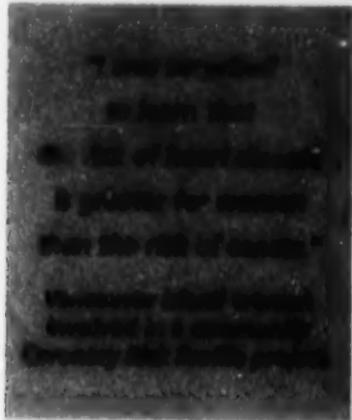
Knowing the warning signs may save your life.

### **Heart attack: signs and symptoms**

- Vague discomfort in the chest that doesn't go away
- Sudden, severe crushing chest pain that may move to other parts of the body
- Heaviness, pressure, squeezing, fullness, burning, or other discomfort in the chest, shoulder, arms, neck, or jaw that doesn't go away
- Unusual pain that spreads down one or both arms
- Nausea or indigestion that won't go away, or repeated vomiting
- Shortness of breath, paleness, sweating, or weakness
- Feelings of extreme anxiety, denial, or fear

## **Stroke: signs and symptoms**

- Sudden weakness, numbness, and/or tingling of the face, arm, or leg (may last only a few seconds)
- Sudden trouble speaking or understanding speech
- Dimness or loss of vision, particularly in one eye, or double vision
- Sudden or severe unusual headache
- Unexplained dizziness or lightheadedness, unsteadiness, fainting, or a sudden fall



# MENOPAUSE

Menopause usually happens between the ages of 45 and 55, when a woman stops ovulating. Menopause is a natural process that marks the end of a woman's ability to bear children.

## Know the facts.

- In menopause, periods gradually become irregular as ovaries stop producing oestrogen.
- You have reached full menopause when your periods have stopped altogether for 12 months (or two years if you are under 50).
- It is still possible to get pregnant during the transition period (within a year or two after periods stop).
- After menopause, you are at greater risk for heart disease and thinning bones.

## Know the signs.

You *may* experience any one or more of these signs—but fortunately, no one has them all.

- Irregular periods
- Hot flashes/flushes (suddenly feeling hot)
- Night sweats
- Weight gain
- Mood changes (anxiety, lethargy, irritability, depression)
- Changes in sex drive
- Itchiness and dryness of the vagina
- Difficulty sleeping
- Frequent urination
- Skin changes
- Forgetfulness

## Take care of yourself.

- Become informed. If symptoms bother you too much, you can choose among a variety of therapies, including diet, exercise, vitamins, and herbs, as well as hormone therapy or other medical approaches. Check with BC Women's Hospital for more information on non-medical approaches (see *Women's Health in Midlife Kit* in the Resources section on page 44), and work with your health care professional to find the right solution that carries the least risk for you.
- Keep a record of your periods and any other symptoms, both physical and emotional. Report any irregular bleeding to your health professional.
- Don't smoke.
- Eat a healthy diet and get some exercise most days.
- Keep your stress level down. See page 10 for some ideas.
- For hot flushes, dress in loose clothing, have cold drinks, carry a hand fan, and take cool showers. Keep your home and workplace cool, and avoid alcohol, caffeine, and hot spicy food.
- Use a water soluble lubricant such as K-Y Jelly (not Vaseline) for vaginal dryness during sexual intercourse .



# **PREMENSTRUAL SYNDROME (PMS)**

PMS is a term for the wide range of physical and emotional symptoms that often show up a week or ten days before the menstrual period begins. The cause of PMS is unknown, but it appears to be a natural hormonal condition that causes discomfort but no lasting harm. PMS symptoms may include headaches, backaches, weight gain, fatigue, mood swings, tender breasts, bloating and water retention, increased appetite, diarrhea or constipation, clumsiness, confusion, crying, irritability, and several others.

## **Learn to manage your symptoms.**

- Start by keeping a monthly record of your menstrual period, your symptoms, when they start, and when they end. After a few months, you'll be able to tell whether or not you have PMS and how it affects you.
- Eat small balanced meals four or five times a day. Eliminate caffeine, alcohol, and sugar, and limit salt (to reduce water retention and bloating).
- Get moving. Physical exercise helps relieve PMS.
- Taking 50 mg of vitamin B6 twice a day may help. (Never take more than 500 mg a day.)
- Learn to reduce stress and anxiety with deep breathing, yoga, and other relaxation techniques.

# **SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES (STDs)**

STDs include chlamydia, gonorrhea, herpes, genital warts, and HIV/AIDS. Most women who have a sexually transmitted disease don't notice any symptoms, but if left untreated some STDs can cause pelvic inflammatory disease and infertility.

## **Protect yourself**

- Don't have unprotected sex (vaginal, anal, or oral). **ALWAYS** use condoms to prevent STDs, including HIV/AIDS.
- Don't share needles.
- If you have had unprotected sex, request a screening test for STDs when you have your PAP test.

# URINARY INCONTINENCE

Women are more likely than men to have difficulty with incontinence, in part because of the effects of childbirth and hormonal changes during menopause. Women can experience urinary incontinence at any age, but it is more likely to affect women over 45. There are different types of incontinence, some of which may require medical treatment, but in some cases you can control it with a combination of self-care approaches.

## Diet

Try avoiding foods and drinks that may irritate the bladder. Possibilities include alcohol, tea, coffee, soft drinks, chocolate, tomatoes, spicy foods, and fruits high in acid.

## Behaviour

Train your bladder to hold more urine. Avoid urinating every time you feel a mild urge, and set up a schedule for urinating and try to stick to it. To empty your bladder more completely, lean forward while urinating.

## Exercises

Strengthening the pelvic muscles can make it easier to control the flow of urine. To exercise the pelvic muscles, squeeze them for a count of ten. Repeat 12 to 20 times and do three sets a day.

# **VIOLENCE**

The most common forms of violence against women are battering and sexual assault. Most acts of violence against women are committed by people we know rather than by strangers.

Battering often begins with verbal threats or abuse or relatively minor incidents. But these incidents can become more serious and may cause physical harm.

- If you are in a marriage, a relationship, or a family that includes violent behaviour or inappropriate sexual behaviour, don't keep it to yourself. Tell a friend, a member of the clergy, or a health professional.
- Know where to go for help. Your local crisis help line, health unit or public health office, women's centre or transition house, police department, or hospital will have information on shelters and safe homes. Look in the Yellow Pages for hot lines and other resources you might need.
- Watch for warning signs such as threats or drunkenness so that you can avoid danger or seek protection.
- Have an "exit plan" ready to use in an emergency.



## **PART 3: PROTECTING YOUR HEALTH**

*To stay on top of your health, consider having all the recommended immunizations and screening tests. Immunization alerts your immune system to a disease so your body can quickly wipe it out before it takes hold. Screening tests warn you that something may be wrong early enough to get treatment before it becomes serious.*

### **IMMUNIZATIONS**

Most people have immunizations for pertussis (whooping cough), diphtheria, tetanus, polio, measles, mumps, and rubella (German measles) as children.

#### **Diphtheria and Tetanus**

Tetanus (also known as lockjaw) can be very serious. Thanks to immunization, diphtheria has almost disappeared in Canada. To ensure continuous protection, you need a booster for these every 10 years. If it has been at least five years since your last Td (tetanus and diphtheria) shot and you have a wound that may be contaminated, ask if you need a Td booster.

#### **Rubella**

If you are of child-bearing age and you do not have records showing that you were vaccinated for measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR), talk to your doctor about whether or not you should get a shot. Rubella can cause congenital defects in a developing fetus.

## **Influenza**

If you are 65 or over or have a chronic health condition such as diabetes, heart disease, or lung disease, you should have an influenza vaccination every year in the autumn.

## **Pneumococcal vaccine**

If you are 65 or over, you need a one-time pneumococcal vaccine to prevent a serious form of pneumonia.

## **Hepatitis B**

If you may be exposed to infected blood (for example, health care providers, IV drug users, and people with multiple sexual partners), you need a hepatitis B vaccination.

## **Others**

You may need other vaccinations if you plan to travel in areas where diseases such as hepatitis, typhoid, and yellow fever are common.

# SCREENING TESTS

## Blood Cholesterol

Having some cholesterol (fat) in your blood is normal, but having too much of a certain kind of fat known as LDL (low-density lipoprotein, or "bad" cholesterol) increases your risk of heart disease and stroke. However, high levels of HDL (high-density lipoprotein, or "good" cholesterol) can help protect against heart disease.

If you are over 55 or have a family history of high blood cholesterol or heart disease (before age 55 in your father or brother or before age 65 in your mother or sister), you may need a test to establish your blood cholesterol level. Other reasons for testing blood cholesterol are high blood pressure, smoking, too much abdominal body fat, diabetes, and eating a high fat diet.

Your total cholesterol level should be below 5.2 mmol/l, and your HDL should be above 1.1 mmol/l. Anything between 5.2 to 6.2 total cholesterol is borderline high risk. Above 6.2 is high risk.

See pages 20-22 for tips on keeping your blood cholesterol at a healthy level.

## Blood Pressure

To protect yourself against strokes and heart attacks, have your blood pressure tested whenever you visit your doctor or every two to three years, whichever comes first. If you are on the birth control pill or if you are over 65, have a blood pressure test once a year.

Normal blood pressure is around 120/80. The numbers refer to the pressure that builds up in your blood vessels when your heart contracts (the first number) and relaxes (the second number). Anything over 140/90 is considered high enough to need attention. Blood pressure can go up and down for a number of reasons, however, so you may want to check it a few times to determine whether or not you have a problem. See pages 20-22 for tips on keeping your blood pressure at a healthy level.

## **Blood Sugar**

New Canadian guidelines suggest that women over 45 should have a blood-sugar test every three years to detect late-onset diabetes. You may need the test more often if you have one or more of the major risk factors:

- obesity
- family history of diabetes
- mother of a nine-pound or heavier newborn
- history of pancreatic disease
- member of a high-risk ethnic group (Aboriginal, Hispanic, Asian, African)
- diagnosed with coronary heart disease
- previous indications of high blood-sugar or glucose intolerance

## **Breast Health**

When breast cancer is discovered early, treatment is more likely to be successful. There are three ways to detect breast lumps that may be cancerous:

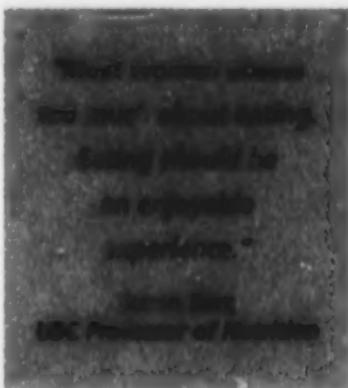
1. examine your own breasts every month, and
2. have your health care professional examine your breasts once a year, and
3. have a mammogram every two years between the ages of 50 and 79. The benefit of mammograms for women under 50 is still unclear, but you may want to begin mammograms at age 40 if you have a mother or sister who had breast cancer before menopause.



If you are not sure how to give yourself a breast exam, ask for help from your health care professional or contact your local Cancer Society office. See the section on "Getting Help" for more information and resources.

## Healthy Weight

Avoiding excess body fat helps protect against several health problems such as high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, gall bladder disease, osteoarthritis, gout, and cancer. The best way to keep a check on your weight is with the Body Mass Index (BMI). The BMI is the ratio of height to weight. A BMI of 20 to 25 is good for most people. For example, a healthy weight for a woman 170 cm (5 ft. 8 in.) tall would be anywhere between 54.4 kg (124 lb.) and 71 kg (156 lb.).



Use the BMI chart below to find out if you are overweight, underweight, or a healthy weight. If you are overweight, see pages 3-5 for tips on healthy eating and exercise.



# A Healthy Weight

Instead of using the standard height-weight charts, most diet experts look to the Body Mass Index (BMI) as a healthier measure. The BMI relates to excess body fat, rather than simple overweight. In the table (below) find your height in the left-hand column, then move across the row until you find your approximate weight. The number in bold at the top. For most women the target is 20 to 25.

## Body Mass Index

	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	35	40
Height (inches)	Body Weight (pounds)													
58"	91	96	100	105	110	115	119	124	129	133	138	143	167	191
59"	94	99	104	109	114	119	124	128	133	138	143	148	173	198
60"	91	102	106	112	118	123	128	133	138	143	148	153	179	204
61"	100	106	111	116	122	127	132	137	143	148	153	158	185	211
62"	104	109	115	120	126	131	136	142	147	153	158	164	191	218
63"	107	113	118	124	130	135	141	146	152	158	163	169	197	225
64"	110	116	122	128	134	140	145	151	157	163	169	174	214	232
65"	114	120	126	132	138	144	150	156	162	168	174	180	210	240
66"	118	124	130	136	142	148	155	161	167	173	179	186	216	240
67"	121	127	134	140	146	153	159	166	172	178	185	191	223	255
68"	125	131	138	145	151	158	164	171	177	181	190	197	230	262
69"	128	135	142	149	155	162	169	176	182	189	196	203	236	270
70"	132	139	146	153	160	167	174	181	188	195	202	207	243	278
71"	136	143	150	157	165	172	179	186	193	200	208	215	250	286
72"	140	147	151	162	169	177	184	191	199	206	213	221	258	294
73"	144	151	159	166	174	182	189	197	204	212	219	227	265	302
74"	118	155	163	171	179	186	194	202	210	218	225	233	272	311
75"	152	160	168	176	184	192	200	208	216	224	232	240	279	319

Adapted from O.A. Bray and D.S. Gray. Source: National Institutes of Health.  
1996 Family Circle, Weight-Loss Secrets.

## **PAP test**

If you are sexually active, you should have regular PAP tests to detect any changes in the cells of the cervix that could eventually become cancerous. Discuss the frequency of testing with your doctor because the recommended frequency depends on your risk factor and the results of previous PAP tests.

### **Pelvic exam**

A pelvic exam performed by a health care professional can help detect abnormalities in your reproductive organs, such as ovarian or uterine tumours. A pelvic exam consists of an external examination of your genitals, a Pap test, and a manual exam of your uterus and ovaries.

### **STDs (sexually transmitted diseases)**

If you have been sexually active with two or more partners in the previous year, you should request swab tests for chlamydia and gonorrhea. There are also blood tests for syphilis, hepatitis B, and HIV. Chlamydia and gonorrhea can be treated with antibiotics.

## **Part 4: ASSESSING YOUR HEALTH**

### **PERSONAL HEALTH CHECKLIST**

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Don't smoke.		
Do 30 minutes of moderate physical activity most days.		
Eat a balance of fruits, vegetables (including green leafy), whole grains, lower-fat dairy products, leaner meats or alternatives.		
Practice daily stretches or another method of relaxation for 20 minutes.		
Build positive social supports.		
Have no more than two alcoholic drinks a day.		
Don't take illicit drugs.		
Blood pressure approximately 120/80.		
Blood cholesterol less than 6.2 mmol/l.		
Pap tests consistently clear.		
Do monthly breast self-exams.		
Get adequate calcium (1,000 to 1500 mg per day, equivalent to two or three 8 oz. glasses of milk), plus Vitamin D (100 I.U per day, or 200 I.U if you are over 50.		

## **Part 5: GETTING HELP**

### **LIST OF SERVICES/CONTACTS**

#### **GENERAL INFORMATION**

Women's Health Bureau  
BC Ministry of Health  
5-1, 1515 Blanshard Street  
Victoria, BC V8W 3C8  
(250) 952-2256  
Website: [www.health.gov.bc.ca/whb](http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/whb)

Toll-free Ministry of Health  
Information Line  
Victoria: (250) 952-1742  
Toll-free: 1-800-465-4911

Vancouver Women's Health  
Collective and Library  
(604) 736-5262

Medical Services Plan Subscriber  
Information  
Victoria: (250) 386-7171  
Vancouver (604) 683-7151  
Toll-free: 1-800-663-7100

BC Women's Hospital and Health  
Centre  
4500 Oak Street  
Vancouver, B.C., V6H 3N1  
(604) 875-3060

#### **INFORMATION ON SPECIFIC TOPICS**

##### **Addictions**

Alcohol and Drug Information and  
Referral  
1-800-663-1441  
Lower Mainland: (604) 660-9382

Aurora Centre  
4500 Oak Street  
Vancouver, B.C., V6H 3N1  
(604) 875-3060

##### **Breast Health**

Screening Mammography Program  
of B.C.  
#414 - 750 West Broadway  
Vancouver, BC V5Z 1H3  
(604) 660-3636  
For the location of your nearest  
screening centre: 1-800-663-9203  
(toll-free)

BC Women's Breast Health Program:  
(604) 875-3705

BC Women's Breast Implant Centre  
and Information Line:  
(604) 875-2013

**Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation**  
#504 - 1128 Hornby Street  
Vancouver, BC V6Z 2L4  
Lower Mainland: (604) 683-2873  
Toll-free: 1-800-561-6111

**Canadian Cancer Society**  
B.C. and Yukon Division  
565 West 10th Avenue  
Vancouver, BC V5Z 4J4  
(604) 872-4400

**B.C. and Yukon Breast Cancer Information Project**  
Lower Mainland: (604) 872-4400  
Toll-free: 1-800-663-2524  
**Publishers of *Abreast in the Nineties* (free quarterly newsletter)**

**B.C. Cancer Agency**  
Vancouver Cancer Centre and Library  
600 West 10th Avenue  
Vancouver, BC V5Z 4E6  
Lower Mainland: (604) 877-6000, local 2690  
Toll-free: 1-800-663-3333, local 2690

### **Bone Health**

**BC Women's Osteoporosis Information Line:** (604) 875-2555

**Osteoporosis Society of BC**  
(604) 731-4997  
1-800-363-1933

### **Heart Health**

**Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada**  
Suite 200, 1260 George Street  
Ottawa, ON K1N 9M2  
(613) 241-4361

**Heart and Stroke Foundation of B.C. and Yukon**  
1212 West Broadway  
Vancouver, BC V6H 3V2  
1-800-693-8008  
(604) 736-4404

**Heart and Stroke Foundation of B.C. and Yukon**  
#1 - 947 Fort Street  
Victoria, BC V8V 3K3  
(250) 382-4035

**British Columbia Heart Health Demonstration Project**  
Population Health Resource Branch  
Ministry of Health and Ministry Responsible for Seniors  
Main Floor, 1520 Blanshard Street  
Victoria, BC V8W 3C8  
(250) 952-1482

### **Incontinence**

**West Coast Continence Clinic**  
1-800-336-8708  
**Publishers of the Canadian Continence Network Newsletter**

**BC Women's Continence Clinic:**  
(604) 875-3060

### **Menopause**

**North Shore Menopause  
Information Centre**  
Suite 212, 1940 Lonsdale Avenue  
North Vancouver, BC V7M 2K2  
(604) 985-5879

**BC Women's Hospital and Health  
Centre**  
4500 Oak Street  
Vancouver, B.C., V6H 3N1  
(604) 875-3060

### **Mental Health**

**Provincial Mental Health Advocate**  
(604) 775-4000

### **Nutrition**

**Dial -A-Dietitian/Nutrition Hotline**  
1-800-667-3438

**BC Women's Health Centre Nutrition  
Counsellor:** (604) 875-2267

### **PMS**

**BC Women's PMS Self-Care Program:**  
(604) 875-3694

### **Violence**

**Battered Women's Support Services**  
PO Box 1098, Postal Station A  
Vancouver, BC V6C 2T1

**BC Women's Sexual Assault Service:**  
(604) 875-2881

**Information and Referral for Victims'  
Services** 1-800-563-0808

**Positive Women's Network**  
Pacific AIDS Resource Centre  
1107 Seymour Street  
Vancouver, BC V6B 5S8  
(604) 893-2202,  
(604) 681-2122 (local 200)

**Rape and Assault Crisis Line**  
Surrey Women's Centre  
PO Box 33519  
Surrey Place Mall  
Surrey, BC V3T 5R5  
(604) 589-8373

**Stopping the Violence (counselling  
for women in abusive relationships)**  
BC/Yukon Society of Transition

**Houses**  
22318 McIntosh Avenue  
Maple Ridge, BC V2X 3C2

**Violence Prevention Information  
and Referral**  
1-800-606-5483

## WEB SITES

### General Health

B.C. Ministry of Health:

[www.hlth.gov.bc.ca](http://www.hlth.gov.bc.ca)

Calgary Regional Health Authority:

[www.crha-health.ab.ca](http://www.crha-health.ab.ca)

C-Health (health news from

Canadian news site, Canoe):

[www.ca.canoe/health/home.html](http://www.ca.canoe/health/home.html)

Health Canada:

[www.hwc.ca/](http://www.hwc.ca/)

Healthnavigator (a brief guide to sources of health information from the Consumer Health Information Services of the Toronto Metropolitan Reference Library): [www.mtrli.toronto.on.ca/centres/chis/finder.html](http://www.mtrli.toronto.on.ca/centres/chis/finder.html)

Healthyway:

<http://bc.sympatico.ca/healthyway>

United States Department of Health

Mayo Foundation for Medical

Education and Research:

[www.mayo.ivi.com/](http://www.mayo.ivi.com/)

Medical Self-Care Archives:

<http://healthy.net/library/journals/self-care/archives/>

### General Women's Health (Canadian)

B.C. Women's Health Bureau:

[www.health.gov.bc.ca/whb](http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/whb)

Canadian Women's Health Network (Resource Page):

[www.cwhn.ca/resource](http://www.cwhn.ca/resource)

Centre for Excellence in Women's Health: [www.bccewh.bc.ca](http://www.bccewh.bc.ca)

Chatelaine Connects Health Section: [www.chatelaine.com/cgi-bin/pick.p](http://www.chatelaine.com/cgi-bin/pick.p)

Health Information Research Unit:

[www-hsl.mcmaster.ca/tomflem/womenshealth.html](http://www-hsl.mcmaster.ca/tomflem/womenshealth.html)

Healthyway, Women's Health: [www1.sympatico.ca/contents/health/communitie](http://www1.sympatico.ca/contents/health/communitie)

### General Women's Health (US)

Healthfinder (US Department of Health and Human Services, section on women's resources): [www.healthfinder.org/justforyou/women/default.htm](http://www.healthfinder.org/justforyou/women/default.htm)

HealthWeb Consumer Health, Women's Health:

[www.uic.edu/depts/lib/health/hw/consumer/women](http://www.uic.edu/depts/lib/health/hw/consumer/women)

Medscape, Women's Health Section: [womenshealth.medscape.com/home/topics/wo](http://womenshealth.medscape.com/home/topics/wo)

**National Women's Health Resource Centre (NWHRC):**  
[www.healthywomen.org](http://www.healthywomen.org)

**WebMedLit (choose the topic, Women's Health, from the main page):** [www.webmedlit.com](http://www.webmedlit.com)

## **SPECIFIC ISSUES**

### **Cancer**

**Canadian Cancer Society:**  
[www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)

**BC Cancer Agency:**  
[www.bccancer.bc.ca](http://www.bccancer.bc.ca)

### **Heart Health**

**Guide to Medical Information and Support:** [www.geocities.com/HotSprings/1505/](http://www.geocities.com/HotSprings/1505/)

**American Heart Association:**  
[www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)

**BC Heart Health:** [www.heart-health.org](http://www.heart-health.org)

**Healthy Heart Program:**  
[www.healthy-heart.org](http://www.healthy-heart.org)

**Centre for Cardiovascular Education:**  
[www.heartinfo.org](http://www.heartinfo.org)

### **Menopause**

**A Friend Indeed newsletter:**  
[www.afriendindeed.ca](http://www.afriendindeed.ca)

**Canadian Women's Health Network:**  
[www.cwhn.ca/resource/resource.html](http://www.cwhn.ca/resource/resource.html)

**Menopause Online:**  
[www.menopause-online.com](http://www.menopause-online.com)

**North America Menopause Society:**  
[www.menopause.org](http://www.menopause.org)

**North Shore Menopause Information Centre:**  
[www.menopause-center.org](http://www.menopause-center.org)

**Power Surge:** [hometown.aol.com/dearest/index.htm](http://hometown.aol.com/dearest/index.htm)

**Soy Protein Council:**  
[www.sp council.org](http://www.sp council.org)

**U.S. Soyfoods Directory:**  
[www.soyfoods.com](http://www.soyfoods.com)

### **Osteoporosis**

**Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada:**  
[www.medical.org](http://www.medical.org)

**Osteoporosis Online:**  
[www.osteoporosis.ca](http://www.osteoporosis.ca)

### **Physical Activity**

**Canada's Physical Activity Guide:**  
[www.paguide.com](http://www.paguide.com)

## **FURTHER READING/RESOURCES**

### **Alternative Healing**

*Alternative Health Care: The Canadian Directory* by Bonni Harden and Craig Harden

*The Herbal Menopause Book* by Amanda McQuade Crawford

*The Herbs of Life: Health and Healing Using Western and Chinese Techniques* by Leslie Tierra

*The Natural Remedy Book for Women* by Diane Stein

### **Bone Health**

*The Osteoporosis Book: Lifestyle Tips for Healthy Bones* by G. Ellert and J. Wade, TrelleEnterprises Inc., 202-2577 Willow Street, Vancouver, BC, V5Z 3N8

*Preventing and Reversing Osteoporosis* by Dr. A.R. Gaby

### **Breast Health**

*The Complete Breast Book* by J. Engel

*Dr. Susan Love's Breast Book* by Dr. Susan Love

*Intelligent Patient Guide to Breast Cancer* by I. Olivotto, K. Gelmon, and U. Kuusk, with C. Clegg, 1995, Intelligent Patient Guide Ltd., 517-750 W. Broadway, Vancouver, BC, V5Z 1H4

### **General Health Information**

*A Complete Guide to Women's Health* by B.D. Shephard, MD., and C.A. Shephard

*Healthwise Handbook* from Healthwise Inc., PO 1989. Bopise, ID 83701, (208) 345-1161

*I'm Too Young to Get Old, Health Care for Women Over 40* by Dr. Judith Reichman

*Living a Healthy Life With Chronic Conditions: Self-Management of Heart Disease, Arthritis, Stroke, Diabetes, Asthma, Bronchitis, Emphysema, and Others* by K. Lorig et al.

*The New Our Bodies, Ourselves* by Boston Women's Health Collective

*Ourselves Growing Older* by Paula Brown Doress and Donna Laskin Seigal

*Take Charge of Your Body: A Woman's Health Advisor* by Dr. Carolyn DeMarco

**Women's Health Matters**  
(newsletter)

Women's College Hospital,  
76 Granville Street,  
Toronto, ON M5S 1B2

**Women of All Ages** by M. Stoppard

**Catching Our Breath** by Deborah  
Holmberg-Schwartz, Women's  
Health Clinic, 3rd Floor, 419 Graham  
Avenue, Winnipeg, MN R3C 0M2

### **Heart Health**

**Women and Heart Disease** by  
Edward Diethrich and Carol Cohan

### **Medical Consumerism**

**The Savvy Patient: How to Be an  
Active Participant in Your Medical  
Care** by D.R. Stutz, MD, and B Feder

### **Menopause**

**A Friend Indeed: for women in the  
prime of life** (monthly newsletter)  
Box 515, Place du Parc Station,  
Montreal, PQ H2W 2P1

**Dr. Susan Love's Hormone Book** by  
Dr. Susan Love

**Eat Well for a Healthy Menopause:  
the low-fat, high-nutrition guide** by  
Elaine Moquette-Magee

**The Estrogen Decision** by Susan Lark

**Making Choices: Hormones After  
Menopause. A Decision Aid for  
Women.** Ottawa Health Decision  
Centre, Ottawa Civic Hospital (613)  
798-5555, ext. 6183

**Menopause** by Dr. Miriam Stoppard

**Menopause Naturally** by Sadja  
Greenwood

**Understanding Menopause** by  
Janine O'Leary Cobb

**Women's Health in Midlife Kit:  
Making Informed Decisions About  
Hormone Therapy and Making  
Informed Decisions About  
Complimentary Therapy**, BC  
Women's Hospital and Health  
Centre, (604) 875-3050

### **Mental Self-Care**

**The Feeling Good Handbook** by  
D. Burns, MD

**Learned Optimism** by M. Seligman

**Rapid Relief from Emotional Distress**  
by G. Emery and J. Campbell

**The Relaxation Response** by  
H. Benson and M. Klipper

**Trusting Ourselves: The Complete  
Guide to Emotional Well-Being for  
Women** by K. Johnson

## **Nutrition**

*The Nutritional Challenge for Women* by Louise Lambert-Lagace

## **Other Health Issues**

*Canadian Continence Network Newsletter*, West Coast Continence Clinic, 1-800-336-8708

*Women and Fatigue* by Dr. Holly Atkinson

## **PMS**

*Self-Help for Premenstrual Syndrome* by Dr. Michelle Harrison

## **Wellness**

*Active Living* from Human Kinetics Canada, 1800-465-7301

*University of California at Berkeley Wellness Letter*, the Newsletter of Nutrition, Fitness and Stress Management, (904) 445-6414